

Obituary.

JOSEPH COATS, M.D.,

Professor of Pathology, University of Glasgow.

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THE too early death of Professor Joseph Coats removes from the University of Glasgow one who, being in the best sense of the words one of her most faithful sons and disciples, had come to be in later years one of the most distinguished of her professors, and an influence for good, both intellectual and moral, among her students second to none. Yet it was only in 1893 that Dr. Coats was admitted to the professoriate, and although for many a year before that he had performed, with general acceptance, almost all the duties assigned to a professor of pathology, it is sad indeed to think that a life so unswervingly devoted to great ends and noble ambitions should have been cut short just when the full enjoyment of the status, as well as the duties, had opened the way for further developments of his admirable and carefully-studied methods and hard-won experience.

Almost thirty years ago it could plainly be perceived, and was actually known to the few who were then in intimate relations with Dr. Coats, that the decided bent of his mind was towards scientific pathology, and that to become a teacher of that subject was the dream of his life. The circumstances under which this purpose was formed could hardly be said to be favourable, except to one whose youthful enthusiasm, and freedom from self-seeking in any unworthy sense, led him to prefer the hard and thorny path to the easy and apparently more profitable one of general practice. At that time the Glasgow Royal Infirmary employed indeed a pathologist for the performance of the very numerous necropsies, and the position was held by a medico-legal expert busily engaged in family practice, an able man undoubtedly, but one from whom anything like organised teaching of pathology could not possibly be looked for. On the other hand the University, as regards the professoriate, was organised entirely on the old basis common at one time to all the universities of Scotland, in which the professors of the institutes of medicine (now of physiology) was supposed to be commissioned to deal with the whole theory of medicine, including physiology, pathology, and a certain amount of the generalities also of therapeutics and hygiene.¹

¹ NOTE (Feb. 6th, 1897).—In Edinburgh University the subject of general pathology had been separated so as to form a distinct professorship, but it was taught purely *ex cathedra* by an eminent and able man who simply dwelt apart in the region of book lore, and hardly ever went near a dead body. It was altogether too much on the lines of Hotspur's experience on the battlefield "when the fight was done," and he encountered unexpectedly a dandy gentleman moralising it all from the point of view of the pure theorist and aesthete, with Court suit and pouncet box. No fruitful pathological teaching could come of such an arrangement, and

But in 1870 Glasgow was still without a professor, even of "general" pathology, and the professor of the institutes of medicine was a very worthy and venerable old gentleman, who most tenaciously held that pathology was a part of his commission, but who was no more competent to teach it according to modern methods, than to teach astronomy or geology. The last Universities' Commission at that date had attempted a compromise, so far as Glasgow was concerned, between the "general" teaching of pathology current in Edinburgh and the only true and fruitful methods, by instructing that candidates for graduation must either have attended a six months' course of "general" pathology or a three months' course of pathological anatomy together with a second course of practice of medicine. Unfortunately, no arrangements of any kind were made, or could be made, for pathological anatomy to be taught at all under the superintendence of the University, as long as the Royal Infirmary pathologistship remained on the footing above referred to. It was, therefore, under these discouraging conditions an act of high and heroic daring for Dr. Coats, immediately after his graduation, to go to Würzburg and Leipzig, in order to become thoroughly equipped under von Recklinghausen and Ludwig as a teacher of a non-existent department (in Glasgow) of the medical art. This, however, Dr. Coats did, and approved himself as so capable, that for a few years, even before the University was transplanted from the High Street to Gilmore Hill, he was placed in a position to be able to initiate a new style of teaching in the old Royal Infirmary. When the Western Infirmary was opened in 1874, Dr. Coats was at once elected pathologist, and an arrangement was entered into by which, though by no means an ideal one, the stubbornness of the old professor of the institutes gave way, and the new pathologist was permitted to rank, academically, as his assistant. And thus, although not in fact a professor, Dr. Coats obtained a monopoly of teaching in his department which really belonged to no professor. So long as he held the pathologistship he was in possession of the materials, and no rival could possibly intervene. On the other hand, his teaching was adopted by the University, under the ordinances of the time, as fully as if he had held a professorship.

It took a strong man to do all this, and it is much to Dr. Coats's credit that he did it without a whisper of dissent from anyone on the ground of inefficiency, or even want of attention to the minutest details of the work. Even the most necessary outfit of a class of pathology of the kind now adverted to is, as every expert knows, both a troublesome and an expensive business. But Dr. Coats's perseverance never flagged. He was determined from the first that pathology should be taught on the best modern lines, and somehow or other the necessary means and apparatus sprang up, as under the wand of a magician. It was all done by what must be called a truly noble spirit of self-abnegation. The income from the class was considerable in the end, but it was freely

there were not a few friends of the University of Edinburgh, shortly before Dr. Coats's date, who would have been glad to have seen the Chair of General Pathology abolished altogether. Fortunately the next succession to that chair in Edinburgh brought in the new spirit, so that "pathology" for the first time ceased to be "general," and was taught in the University, as it had been more or less out of it, as a science based on actual observation and research.

spent in bringing things more and more towards perfection. Though he had no special gift or grace of eloquence, and was even almost too reticent in general society to be what is called popular, he secured from the first the confidence of the student body, who have generally a pretty clear and correct diagnosis of "the right man in the right place" so far as they are concerned. No one of them ever had the slightest misgiving about Coats. In a perfectly simple and unadorned way he made them to see, and feel, and handle instrumentally and otherwise everything with which his department was concerned; and they had faith in him accordingly as their teacher in a measure given to few, even among teachers of the highest class. It was all so plain and simple to appearance that an outsider might have suspected some peculiar magnetism or trick of the *doctrinaire*; but there was no trick in it at all except that Coats knew his work thoroughly, and his pupils knew that he knew it and could make them know it too.

It became abundantly clear to everyone concerned that so soon as a professorship could be instituted, Dr. Coats, and he alone, was the man to occupy it. But the institution of a Chair was a very difficult, and indeed a most cumbersome, business, which occupied the minds of the University managers for years before it could be brought to a successful issue. The University has been blamed for this, but unjustly, as the present writer thinks, having been pretty well cognisant of all the facts. Even the great social influence and the legal tact and acumen of the late Mr. A. B. Macgrigor, when Dean of Faculties, and all along a most generous friend alike of the University and of the Western Infirmary, were baffled for years in the effort to devise a working arrangement whereby the Professor of Pathology could be secured in anything like the position as regards materials for teaching the subject, occupied by Dr. Coats from sheer force of character and efficiency without the status of professor. Moreover, the endowment of a new full professorship is necessarily an expensive business; and the money required was not forthcoming till comparatively recently.

At length, in 1893, all these difficulties were overcome; and there was not a moment's doubt or hesitation, either in the Court or the Senate of the University as to Dr. Coats becoming the new professor. His relations both with the University authorities and with those of the Western Infirmary had been amicable and mutually self-respecting throughout; and with the whole body of students he was so much a favourite as to have been elected from the first, and continued from year to year, Vice-President of the Students' Representative Council, a body constituted by ordinance under the last Universities Commission, and of which the Vice-President, but not the President, may be drawn from among the past students of the University.

It is somewhat alarming to think now what might have happened, and how much the cause of pathological science in the University might have been hindered, had the first occupant of the Chair of Pathology been a man of a less conciliatory disposition. As it was, Dr. Coats was no sooner firm in his seat than he commenced negotiations for carrying out, by the joint action of the University and the Western Infirmary managers, the splendid Pathological Institute which was formally opened on October 14th, 1896. The proceedings on this occasion were a most pleasing and instructive object lesson as

to the entire cordiality and mutual support of the two governing bodies under the system of (necessarily) "dual control," and from this time onwards the extent and the quality of his resources as Professor of Pathology may be said to have been fully developed, and as well assured as any material arrangements can make them.

It was necessary to make these remarks from the somewhat historic point of view, so that the really immense services of Dr. Coats to his Alma Mater might appear as clearly to outsiders as they are known to the older members of the University of Glasgow. As a teacher of medical science, not Cullen in Edinburgh and Glasgow, nor any of his successors, was more of a creator, in reference to the departments with which they have been associated, than Joseph Coats. And this great position he owed to the simplicity of his aims, the quiet force of his character, the thorough mastery of his subject in detail, and the confidence which everyone reposed in a man who, living ever with a view to great ambitions, never allowed them to be spoiled or soiled by mean and petty personal considerations. It is sad to think that the effect of this great lesson in righteousness, and in the persevering endeavour for a long series of years to perform difficult and complex academic duties newly discovered, should be cut short just as it appeared to have reached its highest point and a promise of years of even more abundant fruition. But the object of these lines is to make sure, as far as may be in the circumstances, that the moral of so admirable an example shall be fully displayed, alike to teachers and to students, and to the medical profession at large.

Dr. Coats was a frequent and a fruitful contributor to the literature of his subject, and almost all his contributions were based upon personal research. In his *Manual of Pathology*, published for the first time in 1883, and now proceeding to a fourth edition under the care of his chief assistant, Dr. Lewis R. Sutherland, there is a careful and reasoned view of the whole subject, as illustrated by the most modern research in a large and philosophic spirit, while at the same time details are everywhere presented in the light, as far as possible, of personal observation. This *Manual* will give the key to his work, and to much other work, in many different directions, and it has already taken its place as a treatise of abiding value, both for students and practitioners. In his *Lectures to Practitioners*, 1888, one particular department of pathology—phthisis pulmonalis—is more exhaustively dealt with; and in every direction it will usually be found that some clear dry light of sound thinking and accurate research is thrown into some dark corner or another, even when it cannot be affirmed that any great original discovery is manifestly set forth. Moreover, Dr. Coats is not only a luminous, but a most readable and interesting expositor of his subject. The even and well-balanced nature, which availed him so much in all his personal relations, is carried into scientific researches, with the result that the reader feels confident of his guide, is led to see the matter all round, and is in no danger of being misled by an *ignis fatuus* of brilliant philosophical or imaginative fireworks. The writer of this notice has had occasion to refer very closely to one of the latest of his contributions on diseases of the arterial system, in the *Journal of Pathology* for 1897 (vol. iv); and he has found it everywhere most informing, and pervaded by the qualities of research above referred to.

For a few years Dr. Coats attempted to combine pathological duties with a specialism in practice; and being a proficient in laryngoscopy almost from its earliest period, he had a not inconsiderable success in what is now a much more largely developed field of lucrative practice. But his object never was money-making chiefly, or indeed at all more than was necessary, and in the end pathology claimed his quite undivided allegiance. As a man, however, of wide sympathies both in religion and politics he was not averse from extraprofessional discussions, though rarely obtrusive and never combative or noisy. He was a Broad Churchman among the Baptists, and often maintained to the writer that in that comparatively small sect there was more religious breadth (or the opportunity for it) than in most of the greater communions whether in England or in Scotland. In the core of him he was an intensely religious man, and his political sympathies were with the Liberal Unionists. His family life was altogether admirable. He is survived by a widow and two girls about 14 and 16 years of age.

Dr. Coats was the son of Mr. William Coats, of Paisley, a somewhat distant relative, we believe, of the two large families of that name who have so largely conduced to the prosperity of that borough by their world-wide reputation as thread manufacturers. Joseph Coats was born in 1846, and had therefore only attained his 52nd year at the time of his death. He was educated at the excellent Neilson school in his native town, and afterwards passed through the classes in arts and medicine in Glasgow University, graduating as M.B. in 1867 with first class honours. Thereafter he went, as above stated, to Germany, and in Ludwig's laboratory did some original research in relation to the heart, which was published in German in 1869. At a considerably later period he went over to Paris to look carefully into Pasteur's work, and, from his close association with Lord Lister during the period of pupilage when Lister was Professor in Glasgow and was working out the principles and details of antiseptic surgery, Coats may be said to have been at the very inception of that great philosophical impulse to the art of healing. He took his higher degree of M.D. in 1870, and almost immediately thereafter began the work of his life, as it has been above narrated in brief summary. He became Pathologist to the Royal, and afterwards to the Western Infirmary, and to the Sick Children's Hospital, and latterly was employed also in medico-legal business. He was a member of most of the medical societies related to his subject in Glasgow and in London, and was one of the initiators of the Glasgow Pathological and Clinical Society. In 1888 when the British Medical Association met in Glasgow he was Vice-President, and in the following year President of the Section of Pathology. Indeed, in every kind of medical institution with which he was connected—academic, social, or professional—his influence was always felt, and always to the advantage of medical fellowship and good fellowship. He was the founder of the University Club in Glasgow, and it gave a most pathetic close to his good work done in this world when, on the day before his death, at a house dinner of compliment and congratulation to Principal Story, a message was received from Professor Coats, as the Honorary Chairman of the club, to the effect that although somewhat better, he could not possibly be present at the dinner, but

that as he had come to understand clearly that the new Principal "means business," he wished him all success and congratulations accordingly. The very next forenoon poor Joseph Coats breathed his last, on Tuesday, January 24th, 1899. He was buried in the Glasgow Necropolis on the succeeding Friday, amid a great concourse of friends, including the Senate of the University and members of the University Court, extra-academical colleagues, teachers, and students. The Very Rev. Principal spoke a few well-ordered words at the funeral service which faithfully reflected the feelings of all present. "None could know him without feeling that he was one whose heart was clean, whose ways were gentle, whose affections were tender, whose aims were high. The counsels of God are to us often strange—even mysterious. The poet's lament is ever and again verified; 'The good die first, and they whose hearts are dry as summer's dust, burn to the socket.' It is God's will, and God is great. There is One who has said, 'What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.' It will be hard to supply the place that he leaves empty among us. He has left a lofty example and a worthy name, of which his University is proud, a memory which we shall always cherish with affectionate regret, work achieved that will long bear wholesome fruit, though he himself has not lived to see it gathered."

The disease which proved fatal to Professor Coats was a malignant tumour in the descending colon. He had also had from infancy, an intermittent, and often apparently insignificant, discharge from one ear, the result of some early destructive process in the middle ear. Otherwise his constitution was generally sound, and his frame lithe and vigorous. About three years ago he began to suffer from insidious and wholly unforeseen attacks of febricula, and something more, occurring at irregular intervals, with slight irregularities of the bowels, which drew attention even at that time to the colon, but without any definite diagnosis. In the summer of 1897 he resided for a time in Guernsey, under the supervision medically of his old friend Dr. John Aikman; and in the autumn of the same year he undertook, with his wife, a voyage round the world, which he enjoyed not a little, and from which he appeared on his return to have derived some considerable benefit. He resumed his work, but had to break it off again, and for the last two months before his death was mostly confined to bed. A dangerous-looking attack of obstruction of the bowels occurred about two months before his death, which made it necessary to consider the expediency of an operation, although the more immediate relief was spontaneously obtained, and the critical condition did not recur. By his own desire, therefore, the first step in colotomy was performed, notwithstanding his everyday-growing feebleness, and the separation of the adhesions around the tumour appeared to have afforded a certain amount of relief. The second stage of the operation was about to have been performed, when the somewhat sudden collapse above referred to occurred, and the patient passed quietly away without any more suffering. His fortitude and even-mindedness were shown forth not less in this last illness than in his previous career. His memory will long remain in Glasgow, without alloy of bitterness of any kind, for he was a man as gentle as he was righteous.

W. T. G.